

Community Bonds

HOW OUR SCHOOL FORGES LASTING LOCAL TIES

*By Terry Elam, President
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Spending 30 years as an educator has been quite a journey, with my philosophy of education evolving through passages of experience.

Although I came from a family of electricians, and was used to being around people with technical training, I believed that the four-year, traditional college was the route everyone should take. Later, as a high school teacher, I thought my mission was to guide every student in that direction. But then one of my students visited me a couple of years after he graduated. "I'm working for your cousin," he said, "as an electrician." He told me his salary, and I exclaimed, "That's great! You're making almost as much as I am." And he replied, "By next year I will be."

At the same time, I knew many students with four-year college degrees in subject areas that rendered them practically unemployable. That shaped my notion of what education really should mean: preparation for life. For most of us, life involves work. If work is to be a key component of one's existence, one must be qualified, satisfied and competent. So I began to see technical education as a vehicle to change the economic conditions of many, many young people.

In the 20 years I've been at Augusta Technical College, my views have continued to evolve as I've watched our college become increasingly intertwined in the entire community. There's hardly an aspect of life in our town that we do not touch in some way, in spheres as diverse as healthcare, recre-



ation, dining, social work, juvenile justice, secondary education, and the entire spectrum of local business and industry. Here are some examples of those community ties:

We have worked extensively with Sitel Corp., an around-the-clock call center that employs 300 to 600 people, depending on workload. We have helped Sitel with developing customer service and computer skills, and many of our students work there part-time. Another company we've partnered with is Procter & Gamble, which has a soap plant and a distribution center in Augusta. For the past seven years, Augusta Tech staff members have worked at Procter & Gamble developing online and computerized training packages in safety and maintenance. As a testament to the company's satisfaction with our services, it has renewed its contract with Augusta Tech every year.

Our CMS program has been unbelievably successful in Waynesboro, where CMS certification is a job requirement at every single manufacturing firm. Following the lead of others, manufacturers have adopted the requirement one by one, including such leading corporations as FIAMM, which makes sealed batteries, and Samsons Manufacturing, the world's largest producer of curtains and drapes. To help provide a qualified workforce for manufacturers, Augusta Tech has implemented a CMS program at Burke County High

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School. Now, the once agriculture-dominated Burke County is a hot area for economic development with an impressive manufacturing base.

Augusta Tech's alliance with local hospitals is extensive because of our numerous health occupation programs. At University Hospital, we provide the curriculum for a Cardiovascular Technology program, while the hospital pays for the staff and provides classroom space. Graduates of this program enter the workforce at average annual salaries of \$35,000-plus. And our Radiologic Technology program is funded jointly with the Medical College of Georgia, located in Augusta. Students take all their clinical classes at MCG, an arrangement that provides our students access to the most state-of-the-art equipment.

Every technical college in Georgia aims to serve its local institutions and activities. In Augusta, that means golf in general and the Augusta National in particular. Thus, our Golf Course Management program directly benefits the over 30 golf courses in our area. Many of those students work at the Masters Tournament — an event that's a publicity dream for any college president, with international visitors rubbing elbows with our students and asking where they go to school. Similarly, as downtown Augusta makes a comeback with revitalized entertainment districts, Augusta Tech is preparing a batch of skilled professionals through the Culinary Arts program. Many of our graduates are employed at new fine-dining establishments downtown.

Affiliations with business and industry would be impossible without advisory committees, which are in place at every technical college in the state. Augusta Tech has more than 500 advisory committee members, local business people skilled in their respective fields who serve as experts and advisers for all our programs. These are the unsung heroes who keep the technical college curriculum focused and relevant to



the real world. I believe that the soaring enrollment figures at Georgia's technical colleges can be attributed to advisory committee members because, quite simply, they tell us what skills people need in the workplace. They in turn benefit from this relationship by helping to shape a prepared workforce.

Community involvement doesn't stop with business and industry. We work with the Chamber of Commerce on recruitment and serve on a variety of committees, especially the Education Committee. We want to make sure that technical education is always at the table when we're talking education at the Chamber. In addition, Augusta Tech is represented at the

United Way, Red Cross and many other social and charitable organizations, since staff members must make community outreach a part of their regular jobs.

Here are a few other community ini-



tiatives I'm extremely proud of:

- At Augusta's Youth Development Center, a long-term facility for troubled male youth, we provide not only GED preparation but also technical training in several fields.
- With Workforce Investment Act funding, we teach basic computer skills at the Labor Department's one-stop facility in Augusta as well as in our refurbished mobile lab, outfitted with computers and driven into rural areas.
- We operate a small-business incubator for the Augusta-Richmond County government. This 17,000-sq.-ft. facility, adjacent to our campus, houses 10 small businesses that pay reduced rent and have access to the services of accountants and attorneys at reduced rates.



No longer a marginal player in the realm of higher learning, technical education is now a mainstream option for vast numbers of students. Its role in

society-at-large is also front and center, as evidenced by our myriad partnerships. Economic development is not a division within our school; our whole school revolves around economic development. Our goal is to change the ability of an individual to become successful in the workforce. By investing in our students, we invest in business. And therefore we invest in the fabric of our communities. [R](#)